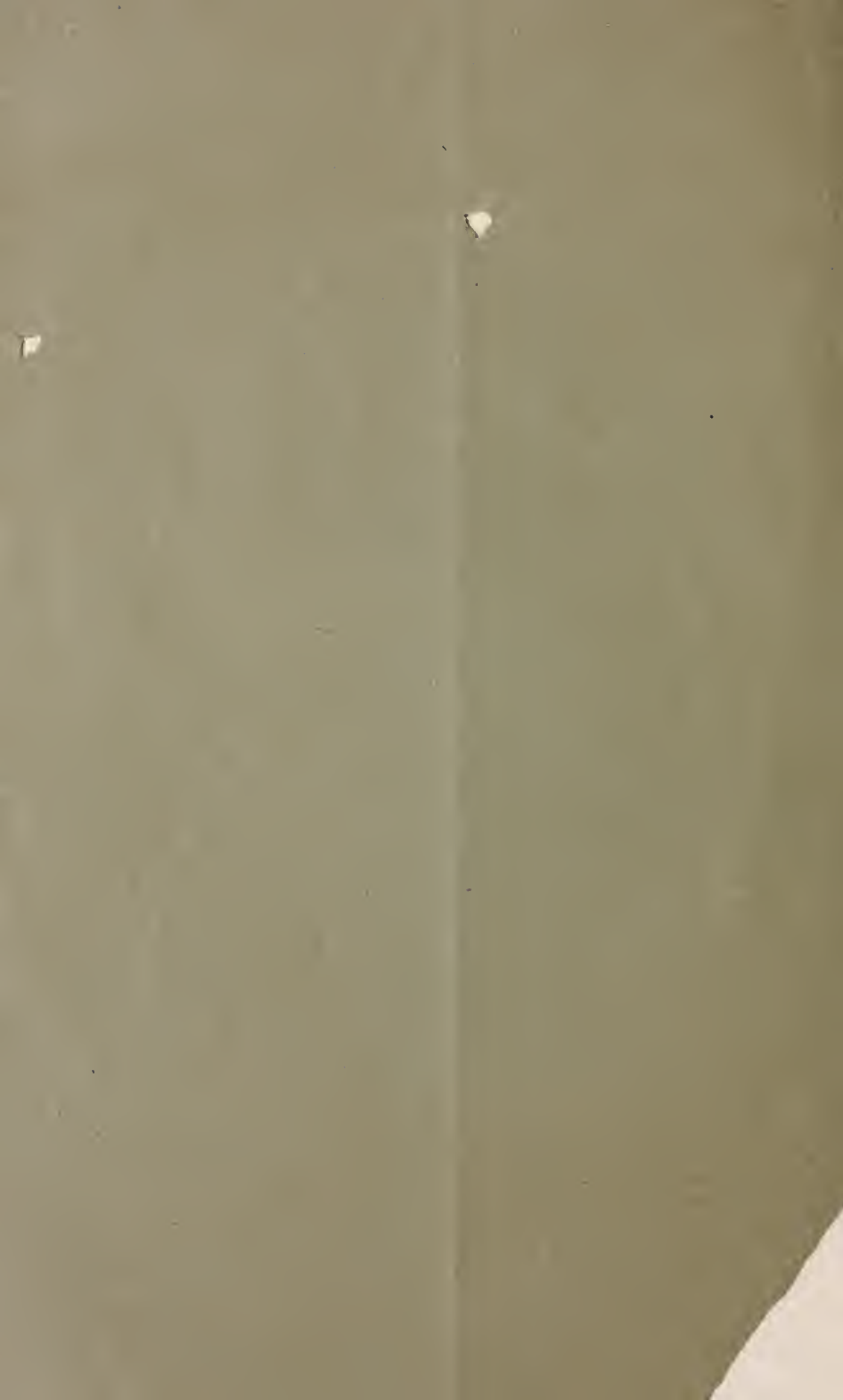

ARENDT VAN CURLER,

FIRST SUPERINTENDENT OF RENSSELAERWICK, FOUNDER OF SCHENEC-
TADY AND OF THE DUTCH POLICY OF PEACE
WITH THE IRIQUOIS.

By WM. ELLIOT GRIFFIS, D. D.

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ARENDT VAN CURLER, FIRST SUPERINTENDENT OF
RENSSELAERWYCK, FOUNDER OF SCHENECTADY, AND
OF THE DUTCH POLICY OF PEACE WITH THE IRIQUOIS.

By WM. ELLIOT GRIFFIS, D. D.,* DOMINE OF THE REFORMED [DUTCH] CHURCH,
SCHENECTADY, N. Y., FROM JUNE 1, 1877, TO APRIL 5, 1886.

[Read before the Albany Institute November 18, 1884.]

In the report of the Special Committee on Archæology of the Albany Institute on the proposed erection of local historical monuments presented April 26, 1881, and printed in volume X, the following paragraph occurs:

“Our respected neighbor, the city of Schenectady, has a university whose success is gratifying to us—has an historical scholar in whose honor we speak, but it is sadly faithless to its most interesting history. It has no monuments of the great raid of 1690, whose narrative was the theme of interest across the great sea—it has no memorial of Corlaer, who, going out of Albany to find the still more remote frontier settlements, by his sagacity and estimable qualities so won the hearts of the savages that thereafter they gave his name as the equivalent of Governor, and who died while *en route* to Montreal, where his excellence had won him an invitation from the French ruler.” (Transactions of the Albany Institute, vol. X, p. 143.)

If not with “the stern joy that warriors feel,” it is with a patriot’s grateful appreciation that we pick up with our pen, the gauntlet thus thrown down, and hand it back on our nib, with a determination to wipe out the reproach of Dorp. The “University”—“old Union” [College]—fathered by Domine Dirk Romeyn, endowed by the Dutchmen of the Schenectady Church, made national by Dr. Nott, having nobly reared her sons in the past, will I doubt not, despite a season of reverses, regain vitality in head as well as body, and yet send forth many sons to fame and honor. Our historical scholar, Professor

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Jonathan Pearson, still hale and wise in sunny old age, has spoken for himself in goodly volumes of priceless lore.

These are realities.

The monument to the martyrs of 1690 is yet in the loins of the future, and the pockets of subscribers; but its local habitation is selected, and the spirit is willing. In due time, I doubt not, will appear a child of art and memory, which shall perpetuate the virtues alike of the founder and the forefathers of the village in the pine woods, once spoken of as in "the far West," and made the theme of grave debate between London and Versailles. To add a further memorial of a man who was great in goodness, as well as renowned in statecraft, is the purpose of this paper.

It usually happens in history that the thunders of battle, the noise of the drum, and the shoutings of great captains drown the still small voice of truth. Through the dust and smoke of war, the more substantial victories of peace are discerned not at first, but later. Of the eccentric, the belligerent, and testy in church and state, the military on horseback, and the patroon on his manor, we have heard much; and epaulettes and cloaked statues are beginning to be numerous. On history's sober page, or in Irving's classic jest, many names are famous or notorious; but, we maintain that of the Holland pioneers who laid the foundations of this commonwealth, and made it the Empire State, there is too little known. There is room for more monuments, as the true perspective of history retires some names to shadow, and brings others into the foreground. Of these, in my modestly submitted opinion and in the estimation of historical critics who note the effect while apparently shortsighted as to the cause, none more deserves honor in some enduring token, than the yeoman, Arendt Van Curler, the first superintendent of the Colony of Rensselaerwyck, and the founder of Schenectady.

Yet no letters on a sculptured monument or in written essay can equal the noble expression of admiration from the uncivilized Indian. The first treaty of peace made between the Iriquois and the Hollanders at Norman's kill near Albany—classic ground by a historic stream, yet to be sung in epic verse—was and is called by them "the Covenant of Corlaer." For over two centuries the red men between the Hudson and the Niagara addressed the governors of New Amsterdam and New York as "Corlaer." When leaving their native hunting-grounds to follow their religious teachers to Canada, the Mohawks of Caughnawaga, though changing their faith, their allegiance, their habitation

and their climate, yet carried with them as a potent talisman the cognomen of their benefactor. The name of Curler is now honored and fragrant in one American tongue, and in three European languages and civilizations. Two years ago, on the publication in Montreal of a *Lexique de la Langue Iriquoise*, by Father J. A. Cuoq, one of the missionary priests of Saint Sulpice, I sent for a copy. Among other nuggets of linguistic lore, I met with a word embalming his memory in the daily speech of the Indians of Caughnawaga. This fragment of the Mohawk tribe has been domiciled in Canada since 1670, when they left their ancestral seats on the Mohawk. Tourists down the St. Lawrence, past the Lachine rapids, will remember their pretty village on the river bank, with its church enriched by the gifts of many a sovereign of France from Louis XIV to Eugénie. Those who read the sporting items in the newspapers will recall that last spring those same Caughnawaga Indians, born almost with a racket on their feet, and a lacrosse web in their hands, beat with ease, at New York, the champion American team just returned from their victories in Europe. Again some of those red men came into notice when Sir Garnet Wolseley, transporting them beyond Egypt, availed himself of their skill in moving his boats through the cataracts and rapids of the Nile.

Cuoq's Iriquois Lexicon, under the word KORA, says: "Monsieur, the abbe Ferland (in his history of Canada) points out the true origin of this word, in making it come from the name of the celebrated Arendt Van Corlar. But it should be added further that from the Dutch governors of Orange and New Amsterdam the title of *kora* passed from them to the English governors of Albany and New York, and thence in course to all the governors of New England. As a matter of fact, the governor-general of Canada finds himself invested with this title of honor, and for Her Majesty, the queen of Great Britain, they are accustomed to exalt more highly her glory by adding the epithet *kowa*, that is, 'the great.'"

When the Canadian Indian of to-day would express in his own tongue the divinity that doth hedge about Victoria Regina, he says *kora-kowa*, "the great Corlar." The splendor of the empress of India shines among her red subjects by borrowed light. Fair as the moon and terrible to the red man as an army with banners, as is her imperial majesty, the sun that supplies the glory of her prestige is the name of Van Curler—the original Mohawk Dutchman. Herein is fulfilled the wise man's prophecy, "Seest thou a man who is diligent in his business, he shall stand before kings."

*While on this subject of titles, let us note further the term "Onontio" used by the Iriquois before the time of Van Curler, and down to the conquest of Canada by Wolfe, and familiar to all readers of Colonial documents or Indian eloquence. On this word Cuoq remarks: "This name [Onontio] was given for the first time to the successor of Champlain to the government of Canada, Charles Hault, De Montmagny, Chevalier de Malte. We have seen the origin of the title of Kora given to the kings and queens of England, and to the English governors of Canada. This title is, if we may so speak, of purely Iriquoise creation, since it is no other than that of the Hollandish governor Corlaer, pronounced by a savage. But it is otherwise with the title Onontio, first conferred upon the chevalier of Montmagny. They translated his name, and to this the missionaries must have lent their assistance, without which the savages could not even have suspected the meaning of Montmagny, the *great mountain*. It is noteworthy that in rendering the name of the French governor by Onontio, they have given only a free translation — the Iriquois word meaning literally 'the beautiful mountain,' and not the great mountain. From the chevalier of Montmagny the title of Onontio passed to his successors until the title of the conquest (1760). For the kings of France they add the adjective *kowa* [the great]."

I have been particular thus in summoning testimony to the worth of Van Curler citing from the aborigines, the first historic occupiers of the soil, because they stood between the rival nations contesting for the possession of this continent, and largely by their attitude decided its occupancy. And the one man who, more than any other, secured and maintained for the Dutch and the English the friendship of the Five Nations of the Iriquois, the most nearly civilized Indians, and who were advanced above all others in political knowledge, against the French and the Algonquin Indians, north of the St. Lawrence, was Arendt Van Curler. Bancroft, Parkman, Higginson, Hildreth, O'Callaghan, Shea, Stevens, Brodhead, and, neither last nor least, our own historical scholar Pearson — name ever honorable to our city — agree in this one thing, viz.: That "the most momentous and far-reaching question ever brought to issue on this continent" — namely, that of

* When, at the bi-centennial celebration of the city of Albany, in July, 1886, a delegation of these Indians from Canada stood in Pearl street awaiting the start of the great parade, I asked one of the young braves how they spoke of Victoria, the queen of England. He answered at once, "Kora." An older Indian corrected him merely to add, "Kowa." The first one inquired of, assenting, rejoined, "Kora, Kowa."

its possession by a Germanic or a Latin race—hung largely upon another question, which side should win and hold the friendship of that powerful confederation of red men, who overawed or held in tribute the Indians from the Mississippi to the Atlantic, and from Lake Champlain to the Chesapeake.

This was the question unanswered for a century and a half.

In the first place, this mighty confederacy of tribes held, as their "long house," that wonderful portion of this continent which seems by nature created for empire, whether in the stone or the iron age, the Empire State it was then, the Empire State it is now. It holds the keys to the water-ways between the fresh and the salt seas, for its rivers run to the Atlantic, the St. Lawrence, the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. Its land routes, fitted for trail, pike, plank, iron or steel roadways, are smoothed ready for foot or wheel, moccasin or tire by nature. Nowhere along the mountain-ribbed Atlantic coast is there such another long, level, natural roadway as that of the Iriquois trail between the cataracts of Cohoes and Niagara, now banded by the steel rails of two mighty corporations.

From Champlain to Montcalm, the French by diplomacy, religion, threats, flattery, and all the resources of Gallic wit, force, and address endeavored to gain over the Iriquois to their king and cause; but ever loyal to "the Covenant of Corlaer," they adhered to the Prince of Orange and the Sovereign of Great Britain. They acted as a stone-wall, a breakwater, against the storm and tide of French aggression, while the English colonies nourished their strength, and won this fair land, first from the Gaul, from Latin ideas and civilization, and then from King George and monarchy.

What began that struggle which from a backwoods raid became a clashing of empires? What part did Van Curler bear? Was he "a Dutch clodhopper," or a far-seeing statesman?

Let us go back twenty-one years before his arrival on this continent:

In 1609, Champlain, in company with a war party of Hurons and Algonquins, proceeding against the Mohawks unwarrantably interfered in their tribal quarrels, and decided the scale of victory. The Mohawks were defeated by the power of gunpowder and invisible missiles. Again, in 1615, this Frenchman in glittering armor with five belching weapons went along with the Algonquins to the Mohawk country to besiege their castle. These proceedings aroused a spirit of hatred against the French, and to counterpoise the odds against them, the Iriquois sought alliance with the Dutch. Powder and ball were their

first desires. Their motives were utterly selfish, when in 1617, two years after Champlain's second filibustering interference, they came to Fort Orange, and made a formal treaty with the Dutch.

A compact made between two alien races on the basis of their mutual hatred to a third party is not likely to last, when the once enemy turns friend, or the old friend falls on adversity. Why was it, that the cruel, selfish savage kept inviolate for over a century this covenant sealed only with the sacrament of wampum belts, amid all temptations to rapture? Why did Dutch and British alike keep with even more faithfulness their word with the weakening savages, even when they had exhausted the benefit of their service? Why, amid all vicissitudes was their treaty negotiated with less fuss, ceremony and spectacular display than Wm. Penn's with the Lenni Lenapis — observed with better faith, too, than was the Philadelphia compact.

In the painting of Benjamin West, by fascinating but uncertain legend, and by the praise of Voltaire, who, to sneer at religion, wrote a lying epigram, the Quaker's treaty has been given world-wide fame. The witty Frenchman said of it "never sworn to, and never broken." History, however, demonstrates, that while Penn and the Friends kept their word, the people of Pennsylvania did not. In New York, the promises on either side were kept, until America and British themselves came to blows, a calamity which fell heavily upon the Iriquois, and from which they never recovered. If it be objected that the raid and burning of Schenectady in 1690, and the five years Indian war under Kieft appear to militate against our statement, we have only to mention that the Schenectady massacre was by the French and proselyted savages from Canada, not of New York, while the five years war under Kieft was waged by Indians not Iriquois. This war, by the way, was healed nominally by Stuyvesant, but actually by Van Curler in 1660.

I am glad that a distinguished gentleman of the legal profession asked me "Who was the founder of Schenectady? Was he any more than a Dutch clodhopper?" I can safely answer that he was a scholar and a gentleman, fluent with his pen, possessing a gift by no means to be despised — the mastery of languages. He was a man of systematic mind, and so faithful to his trust and vow, as to recall a Roman of classic days. Withal, he was so kind of heart, so full of deep conviction of conscience along with a power of rising above the narrowness of sect and nationality, as to suggest a Christian indeed. Brave as a lion, he feared neither round-robin conspirators, nor the schem-

ing lawyer who used his profession mainly to molest honest men, nor crafty savages, nor perfidious French. Further, he had the eye of an engineer and strategist, with the foresight of a statesman.

Arendt Van Curler was the first cousin of Kilian Van Rensselaer, and came to this country in 1630. Of the original company of ten members, or "co-patroons," all on the same footing to plant colonies in America, Kilian Van Rensselaer seems to have been the most successful, and we shall see why. Others formed colonies along the Hudson in New Netherlands. Others disagreeing, or thinking more profitable ventures could be made in the East Indies, gave up America and tried the Spice Islands, Formosa and Japan. Vries became the famed navigator who left his name on the large island near the bay of Yedo. Hendrick Hamel went out as supercargo to Nagasaki, and was wrecked in Corea, kept a prisoner, and escaping, got home to Holland, to find his old friends Kilian Van Rensselaer, dead, and Van Curler, drowned, in far off America; but Rensselaerwyck had prospered. Why? The patroon never visited the colony, but confided all to his agent, Van Curler, the first superintendent. Hear what L. P. Brockett says: "The administration of justice, and the management of its financial affairs, he committed to a commissary-general. Fortunate in the selection * * * his colony prospered much more than that at New Amsterdam, and it was to the good offices of Van Curler, or Corlaer, the first commissary that the colonists at New Amsterdam were indebted more than once, for their preservation from destruction at the hands of the savages" [during Kieft's mal-administration]. This excellent man cultivated the most friendly relations with the Indians, and so strong was their affection for him, that ever after they applied the name Corlaer to the governors of New York, as the highest title of respect. "So too, from the date of the settlement of Albany, the county was never invaded by these sons of the forest. The Schuyler family, for several generations carrying out the policy inaugurated by Van Curler, exerted a powerful influence over the Indians. Unfortunately, Van Curler left no descendants to keep alive the memory of his services.

Van Curler's jurisdiction, as superintendent and justice of the colony, extended from Beeren Island in the Hudson to the mouth of the Mohawk, and he was also colonial secretary until 1642. He provided food and sustenance for the immigrants, promptly bringing them up from Manhattan Island, enrolling them, arranging for their houses and assigning their farms, while guarding against famine, dis-

order, and the foes of the forest and from Canada. He took every right means to increase honest trade. His devotion to his master brought him into collision with the traders "in the bush." A protest against him was fomented by Van der Donck; and his enemies put their names to the paper in a circle, so that it should not be known who had first signed it, or in other words, who was the ring leader. Their activity brought him into such temporary unpopularity that some were for driving him out of the colony as a rogue. Others wished to assassinate him.

Evidently life in a frontier settlement in the woods was then very much what it is now, and the characters much the same. The firmness, courage, fair play, and unwavering good nature and honesty of Van Curler carried him safely through the crisis. By degrees, the popularity of the superintendent returned, and Van der Donck left the settlement. Van Curler's prayer, if it were identical with Job's, was answered, for his rival did "write a book" in 1655, which is still valuable as a literary photograph of colonial New York, the Netherlands in America. Van Curler, according to orders, had "concentrated" the immigrants into a *Kerck burte*, a parish or church, neighborhood, near the Beaver's creek or Greenbush ferry. He built a church and parsonage. This was the first protestant church edifice built as such and so consecrated on the continent of America.

The domine* Megapolensis began his work among the people, morals improved, home life began to be more stable and retired, and prosperity was laid on a sure foundation. Van Curler and the parson were always good friends, the layman ever taking counsel with his clerical brother, and receiving his advice with respect. Thus the unseemly war between bench and pulpit, which disgraced Manhattan island, was unknown in Rensselaerwyck. Through all the stormy administration of Governor Kieft, and the five years' war which wiped out so many Dutch settlements on the Hudson, and nearly annihilated Manhattan,

* There is no other way of spelling the title of a pastor of a Reformed [Dutch] church in Holland, America, South Africa, or the East Indies, but that in which it is invariably spelled in the Dutch records. It is always domine and not "dominie." The Dutch title is the unaltered Latin. "Dominie," in English and Scotch *may* mean a parson of some kind; it *does* mean a teacher or schoolmaster. This orthography of domine is the usage in Corwin's "Manual of the Reformed church in America," in Pearson's "Schenectady First Church Memorial," in *The Christian Intelligencer*, and in the writing of all critical and careful writers (except where printers tamper with their MSS), who write concerning ministers of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, or their offspring. Further, to join a Scotch term savoring of cant or slang to a Latinized form of a Hollander's name is to do something which scholarly Hollanders would never approve of.

Van Curler's firm hand in the colony and unbounded influence over all the Indians, kept the advancing prosperity of the colony of Rensselaerwyck in the safe path. It was in the midst of danger of infectious lawlessness and savage irritation, that he made his first journey into the Mohawk country. Of this wonderful valley he was not the original explorer, though he was probably the first white visitor who described and fully appreciated it.

Humanity prompted him to this westward errand. News came to his ears that two French priests were in the hands of the Mohawks near Caughnawaga, now Fonda. Like tigers with their prey, the savages intended to enjoy the torture of their victims before burning or tomahawking them. Van Curler was a Dutch patriot and a Protestant of Orange dye, but he was more — a Christian and a man. "Why risk life among the bloodthirsty savages, and intermeddle to save a papist and a Frenchman," some doubtless may have said. Van Curler, without argument or reservation, quickly collected ransom to the value of 600 guilders equal to \$250 then, or perhaps \$500 now. He rode up the valley, in September, 1642. It was then dressed in the gorgeous livery of autumn, and bright with many an acre of ripening maize. He called it "the fairest land that the eyes of man ever rested upon," but the moral beauty of his own act exceeded even that of nature. He did not succeed in ransoming or rescuing the priest, Father Jogues; but he secured a promise from the savages not to kill or further torture him. Afterwards, Van Curler assisted Jogues to escape from Albany to France, where at the imperial court at Versailles the scars of his fingers which the savages, like wild beasts, had chewed and from which they had torn out his nails, were kissed by proud lords and lovely ladies as of those of a saint. Again this devoted missionary returned to America, and was again captured by the insatiate Mohawks. This first Roman Catholic missionary on the soil of our state, and the discover of the Lake of the Holy Sacrament, now ignobly named George, finally suffered martyrdom at Ossuerenon, near Auriesville. On the hills overlooking the station of the West Shore railway, he yielded up his life. In his honor, a shrine to the Virgin, "Our Lady of Martyrs," is now erected. Yet with nearly equal propriety, is the name of Van Curler the exemplar of noble humanity linked to the spot.

This was but one of the many visits which Van Curler made to the Indians at their homes and council-fires. Having mastered their vernacular, he was able to hear from their own lips, their side of every

question. Hence, he had never to trust to interpreters, or to rely upon hearsay or uncertain information. When in 1646 Stuyvesant arrived, and began his administration by settling the Indian difficulties which had afflicted the lower settlements, he sent first of all to Van Curler, for advice and direction. Later at a great convention of chiefs of all the non Iriquois nations, held at Esopus in 1660, an agreement of peace was made. In this work, Stuyvesant was the figure-head, and Van Curler the real diplomatist and peace-maker.

One of the many journeys made in carrying out the policy of justice and peace with the Indians brought him to the house of Jonas Bronck, who has given his name to one of the rivers and villages — Bronx and Bronxville — of Westchester county. Here, after punishment inflicted on the actual murderers, peace was made with the Wickwaskeet tribe, at the house of the burgher whose widow Antonia afterwards became Van Curler's wife. They were married in the autumn of 1646, and settled down in one of the best houses of the settlement of Rensselaerwyck, for she was deserving of it, being as her husband states, "a good housekeeper."

Having now the prospect of domestic happiness, desirous also of possessing a farm, the affairs of the colony withal being settled, Van Curler leaving his bride behind him, visited Patria (Holland) to report to his lord the patroon, and get a lease for his "bowerie" which was near Cohoes.

The patroon Kilian Van Rensselaer died in 1646, leaving the colony in the hands of his son Johannes.

Van Curler returning to America went to live on his farm, and there enjoyed the pleasures of unofficial life. Yet his days were far from inactive. He seized every opportunity to educate and benefit the Indians, rescue Christian captives, and cement the bonds of friendship with the red men. Van Curler owned a brewery in Rensselaerwyck and believed that beer was good for Christian and savage; but the use of brandy, rum, whiskey, and the various concoctions of "fire-water" he condemned. He attempted, in vain, however, to influence the Indians against drunkenness, and to prevent the traders from selling strong liquors. At one time, when, on account of troubles largely occasioned by liquor, the relations of the settlers and the Mohawks were strained, we find Van Curler leading twenty-five of the chief men of the settlement and proceeding to Caughnawaga. There on the 17th of September, 1659, after the calumet had been smoked with the sachems Van Curler made a forcible speech, pointing out firewater as

the potent cause of their troubles. His arguments and eloquence were satisfactory and successful, and the links of the covenant chain were forged anew.

Now came the time for another of the great achievements of our hero's life. Largely through his acts and character, the way was paved for the peaceful settlement of the Mohawk valley by the whites. Food had become scarce near Fort Orange, farmers wanted homes, but were not willing to settle at Rensselaerwyck under semi-feudal restrictions. Having left Patria, they wished to hold their land in fee simple, and when dying to bequeath the fruits of their toil to their children. This, under the patroon, they could not do. Van Curler sympathized with them, and himself longed to possess land not as a fief, but as a holding forever. Accordingly he applied, June 18th, 1661, to Gov. Stuyvesant for permission to purchase "the great flat" of the lower Mohawk valley from the Indians, called by them Schenowé, including the site of one of their villages, Schenectady. Owing to influences emanating from Rensselaerwyck, the privilege of trade was not granted until 1672, and at first the little frontier settlement was wholly agricultural. Van Curler for years vainly protested against this churlish and illiberal spirit which savored of the dog in the manger, and so long hindered the growth of a true commonwealth. Van Curler's plea was for unshackled commerce, free trade and farmer's rights, as against monopoly, semi-feudalism and whiskey.

Here note the liberal principles on which Van Curler founded his settlement; they were justice, temperance, and liberty. Wm. Penn has been lauded for buying the land of the Indians. Van Curler did the same. He fought the whiskey-sellers whose fiery liquid destroyed the red men as did small pox, and turned reasoning men into murderous brutes. He pleaded for the rights of trade to actual settlers on wild lands as against monopoly, and for the privilege of holding land in fee simple, and bequeathing it to children. Here, having taken the subject of my sketch beyond the boundaries of Rensselaerwyck, it is proper for me to postpone the continuance of my story. In a further and more elaborate study, I hope to present the life and works of Van Curler in befitting dress. Suffice it to say that in 1664, on the conquest of New Netherlands by the English, one of the first acts of Colonel Nicholls was to send for Van Curler to consult as to his policy with the Indians. Two years later, the French expedition of Courcelles was saved from starvation and probable annihilation by Van Curler. Hastening from Schenectady with provisions he succored his famishing

fellow Christians who had fallen into ambuscade, while also warning them off English ground. Had the founder of the settlement lived, the frightful massacre of 1690 would, doubtless, never have been consummated. In 1667, while on a visit to Canada, by invitation of the French Governor Tracy, Van Curler was drowned during a squall in Lake Champlain. "In the middle of the Lake where Corlaer was drowned," reads the old chronicle, but the exact spot we do not know. For a half century or more this sheet of water was named and known to the English only as "Corlaer's Lake," while "Corlaer's Bay" is still on the maps.

Craving pardon of my hearers, and of this honorable Albany Institute for presenting so fragmentary a paper, pleading shortness of notice, and press of imperative duties as my excuse. I beg leave to state that life and leisure being given, I hope to do fuller justice to a name most noble among those who laid the foundations of the greatness of the Empire State.





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